

IMPROVING INTERACTION BETWEEN PALM BEACH COUNTY FIRE-RESCUE PERSONNEL AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This research project analyzed how local fire stations have not adequately interacted with the neighborhood communities. The problem is that the Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue station personnel are not adequately interacting with the residents of the community. The purpose of this research project was to improve the interaction between the station personnel in Palm Beach County and their local communities.

The descriptive research methodology supported by historical research was utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the literature define fire station interaction within the community?
2. What activities are currently underway at various fire departments in an effort to interact positively with the community?
3. What are the activities that Palm Beach County community residents feel are appropriate for participation by fire department personnel?

The procedures employed to conduct this descriptive research was that of historical information gathered in the literature review, interviews with fire department personnel, and interviews with members of the community. This review indicated that several other fire departments had endeavored to improve their relationship with their communities.

The major findings of this research was that numerous neighborhood outreach programs are taking place throughout the United States. Neighborhood residents in Palm Beach County are very receptive to the idea of the fire station personnel interacting more with their communities. However, the research

demonstrated that there was a lack of organization that involved fire stations and their personnel in the neighborhood activities. The recommendations from this research was to develop additional programs that would take community interaction with the fire station to a higher level than is currently being experienced in Palm Beach County.

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INTRODUCTION

The Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department understands the value of community interaction. Fire stations are strategically located throughout Palm Beach County and all fire stations are staffed twenty-four hours a day. Although fire station personnel sporadically provide programs in the community, there are additional opportunities available to provide a better service. The problem is that the Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue fire station personnel are not adequately interacting with the residents of the community. The purpose of this research project was to improve the interaction between the fire station personnel in unincorporated Palm Beach County and their local communities.

The descriptive research methodology supported by historical research was utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the literature define personnel interaction within the community?
2. What activities are currently underway at various fire departments in an effort to interact positively with the community?
3. What are the activities that Palm Beach County community residents feel are appropriate for participation by fire department personnel?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

For many years the role of the firefighter was to fight fires rather than prevent them. In many departments these views are still common. However, tremendous sums can be saved if effective fire prevention efforts are introduced and integrated into fire department operations (National Fire Protection Association, 1974). Major disasters typically gain public attention, Mayor Wilt McNichols of Denver Colorado states:

One of the ugliest disasters with which a community may be confronted is a raging fire. Many a holocaust is preventable with a proper fire prevention program exercised with understanding and candor. A prevention program cannot be a hit and miss proposition. It must be a constant day after day effort in concert with the cooperation of all citizens in the community who must be made to appreciate the necessity for vigilance and care. Such a fire prevention program can and will pay universal dividends in the safety of lives and property (NFPA, 1974).

The command staff of the Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department has recognized that local fire station personnel are not adequately interacting with the residents in their neighborhoods. The concept of public relations is not new to the fire service, but has not been organized effectively within Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue. Prior to developing a model to improve interaction with the neighborhood, the concept of public relations must be broken down into the two words confusing the term. Makowski states,

If you look up the word “public” in the dictionary, it will tell you that it pertains to the whole community. While the word “relation” has several definitions, the one that pertains to the fire service is “accounting” or “connection.” So, a very basic definition of “public relations” could be construed as an accounting to the community. (Makowski, 1992)

Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue recognizes that public relations must be a high priority. When this department prioritizes a commitment to meet their customers needs, it creates an environment that will make these same customers more supportive of the Department (Brunacini, 1988).

The above-mentioned references brought to light the need for a plan to be developed in order to improve the interaction between Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue and the residents of the community that they serve. This research problem directly relates to the Strategic Management of Change topics covered in the managing change using the change management model and personal aspects of change management sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What are Public Relations?

Public relations are buzzwords that have been defined in various contexts. To be properly understood, it should be broken down into the two words comprising the term.

If you look up the word “public” in the dictionary, it will tell you that it pertains to the whole community as well. While the word “relation” has several definitions, the one that pertains to the fire service is “accounting” or “connection.” So, a very basic definition of “public relations” could be construed as an “accounting to the community. (Makowski, 1992)

A fire department is a public service that has many opportunities to interact with the community it serves. These customers are much more supportive when the fire department prioritizes a commitment to meet their needs (Brunacini, 1988). This departmental commitment to public relations extends the concept of family from the fire department singularly, to the community as a whole. The cohesiveness of fire department members and their willingness to reach out to neighbors provides the basis for effective public relations (Compton, 1996).

The Necessity for Fire Prevention Information

In the 1973 report to Congress “America Burning” 10,000 Fire Chiefs in the United States ranked the lack of effective education on fire safety as the greatest concern in the Prevention of fires.

The report went on to say that the “striking aspect of the nation’s fire problem is the indifference with which Americans confront the subject” (NFPA). When smoke detectors are involved, a fire department public education program should be the primary source to educate the public (National Fire Prevention and Control Administration et al. 1977).

Fire Station Interaction with the Public

There are many ways that firefighters can interact with the citizens of their communities above and beyond the routine fire prevention programs that are commonplace throughout the United States. Some of the activities that directly target the neighborhood include, opening the fire stations for tours, participating in food drives, and speaking to local groups (NFPA). Another valuable tool in educating members of the local public is to conduct a Citizens Fire Academy. This activity provides an overview of fire academy training, as well as demands placed on firefighters (Drick). New strategies to gain access to citizens in their neighborhoods include the home inspection program and installation of smoke detectors (NFPA).

Various Public Relations Methods

Public relations are paramount to effective community-based programs. Often, public relations are constrained due to budget limitations. “A concentrated effort to inform, educate and persuade those controlling the purse strings should be the number one public relations priority of every emergency services agency.” (Bramblette, 1994, p. 8) Modern public relations methods must change to reflect the demands of a more personalized approach for community-based interaction. Since P. T. Barnum,

public relations principles and theories that have evolved are the subject of much study and evaluation (Bramblette, 1994). This information influenced Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue to convey awareness and information to the public regarding other significant programs that the Department has to offer. In order to interact with the residents of a neighborhood, station personnel need to know the demographics of the neighborhoods they serve. While we may probably have some central messages, different groups will be more receptive to those messages if they are custom tailored, and have significant meaning to them personally (Fenichel, 1994, p.10). Some private entities and corporations spend thousands of their marketing budgets on determining what groups are out there, what they might think about their business, and by which communication channel they should communicate the message. “It is simply called market research” (Fenichel, 1995, p.10).

PROCEDURES

Definition of Terms

CERT. Community Emergency Response Teams

EFOP. Executive Fire Officer Program

Fire Station. Personnel, building, and apparatus

HIP. Home Inspection Program

NFA. National Fire Academy

PBCFR Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department

PSA. Public Service Announcement in the form of print, video or radio format

Research Methodology

The desired outcome of this research was to improve the interaction between the fire station personnel and the residents in the surrounding neighborhoods.

The research methodology used was that of descriptive, historical research, and interviews with fire department personnel and members of the community. Information gathered was applied to the actual problem of poor interaction between Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue fire station personnel and their neighborhoods. Historical research, in the form of a literature review was conducted in order to understand the various types of interactions between fire stations and neighborhoods had been conducted in other areas throughout the country. The data gathered was based on the opinions of the general public and fire service professionals.

Introduction of Interviews

Interviews were conducted to answer the research questions: What activities are currently underway at various fire departments in an effort to interact positively with the community? And What are the activities that Palm Beach County community residents feel are appropriate for participation by fire department personnel?

Fire Department Personnel Interview Instrumentation

The goal of the personnel interviews was to answer research question two. Interviewees were asked:

1. To identify those prevention activities, educational programs, and safety programs currently being offered by their Fire Department.
2. To name any activities they thought were appropriate for neighborhood fire station personnel to be involved in, i.e., parades, association meetings, athletic events, etc . . .
3. To suggest activities that they thought might improve interactions between the residents of the community and fire station personnel.

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that all interviewees who responded are employees of a Fire Department. No statistical analysis was made to determine the margin of error in the results.

Residents in the Community Interview Instrumentation

The goal of the interviews was to answer research question three. Interviewees were asked:

1. What were those neighborhood activities, (i.e., parades, neighborhood association meetings, athletic events, etc . . .) that they feel would be appropriate for participation by neighborhood fire station personnel?

Assumptions and Limitations

It was assumed that the interviewees represented the desires and wishes of the majority of Palm Beach County residents who are serviced by PBCFR. No statistical analysis was made to determine the margin of error in the results.

RESULTS

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question #1. How does the literature define fire station interaction within the community?

There are many ways that firefighters can interact with the citizens of their communities above and beyond the routine fire prevention programs that are commonplace throughout the United States. Some of the activities that directly target the neighborhood include, opening the fire stations for tours, participating in food drives, and speaking to local groups (NFPA). Another valuable tool in educating members of the local public is to conduct a Citizens Fire Academy. This activity provides an overview of fire academy training, as well as demands placed on firefighters (Drick). New strategies to gain access to citizens in their neighborhoods include the home inspection program and installation of smoke detectors (NFPA). Other fire departments in the U.S. are conducting a variety of fire prevention activities to include public safety talks, smoke detector programs, participation in safety fairs and use various public media forums (NFPA). Some departments have coordinated Citizen Fire Academies designed to orient participants to firefighter activities and challenges (Drick).

Research Question #2. What activities are currently underway at various fire departments in an effort to interact positively with the community?

The results of the fire service personnel interviews noted what other fire departments were doing

in the area of interactive programs within the community they served. The question along with responses is listed as follows:

1. In your organization what injury prevention activities, educational programs, or safety programs are currently being offered at your neighborhood fire stations?

Home Fire Safety Programs - 92 responded positively to this type of program

Smoke Detector Checks - 73 responded positively to this type of program

CPR Classes - 98 responded positively to this type of program

Child Car Seat Inspections - 19 responded positively to this type of program

Bicycle Safety Rodeo - 12 responded positively to this type of program

Health and Wellness Programs - 46 responded positively to this type of program.

Determination of what fire department perceptions constituted neighborhood activities, was also covered as part of the interview process. The question with response information is listed as follows:

2. To name any activities they thought were appropriate for neighborhood fire station personnel to be involved in, for instance events such as: parades, association meetings, and athletic events? :

Parades - 93% responded positively to this type of program

Neighborhood Association Meetings - 35% responded positively to this type of program

Athletic Events - 72% responded positively to this type of program.

The research brought to light other forms of interaction that were taking place between the fire department personnel and their communities. Additional efforts were being made to interact with the community in the areas of: 1) stations open for child immunizations, 2) station tours, 3) community

meetings, 4) fire department clowns, 5) speakers' bureaus, 6) carbon monoxide detector checks, 7) blood pressure checks, 8) CERT Programs, 9) address verification checks, 10) teenage explorer cadet programs, 11) Wildland home survival, and 12) baby sitter programs.

The responses gave specific indications of what fire department personnel feel are appropriate programs they should have involvement with, in the neighboring communities. Some of the fire department personnel interviewed were not even involved in several of the common neighborhood public events. This finding influenced the recommendation for a more comprehensive neighborhood program incorporating some suggestions from the results and recommendations areas in this research paper.

Some suggestions as to what activities were thought to improve interactions between the residents of the community and the fire station personnel were also solicited as part of the interview process. The question with response information is listed as follows:

3. What additional activities do you think might improve interactions between the local residents of the community and the fire station personnel?

The research exposed other neighborhood activities that fire service personnel thought should be taking place between the fire department personnel and the community in the areas of: 1) Fire and public safety talks, 2) CPR classes, 3) picnics, 4) carnivals, 5) blood pressure checks, and 6) disaster preparedness.

Research Question #3. The following question was asked of the residents of Palm Beach

County:

1. What were those activities, (i.e., parades, neighborhood meetings, athletic events, etc . . .) that they feel are appropriate for participation by fire station personnel?

The results were that, the overwhelming majority of community residents indicated they would like to see the fire department personnel participate in the following community events:

School events - 98% responded positively to this type of program

Safe home programs - 99.4% responded positively to this type of program

Block parties - 68% responded positively to this type of program

Church functions - 32% responded positively to this type of program

Parades - 99.4% responded positively to this type of program

Community meetings - 82% responded positively to this type of program

Neighborhood crime watch meetings - 41% responded positively to this type of program

Birthday parties - 67% responded positively to this type of program

Homeowners' association - 92% responded positively to this type of program

Cook outs - 58% responded positively to this type of program

Athletic events - 89% responded positively to this type of program

Boy Scout meetings - 26% responded positively to this type of program

CPR classes - 100% responded positively to this type of program

PTA meetings - 67% responded positively to this type of program

School career days - 99% responded positively to this type of program

Job fairs - 98% responded positively to this type of program

Tutoring program 87% responded positively to this type of program

Fire safety programs - 100% responded positively to this type of program

Charity fund raisers - 79% responded positively to this type of program

Civic projects - 88% responded positively to this type of program

Town hall meetings - 67% responded positively to this type of program

Safety rodeos - 92% responded positively to this type of program

Child car seat safety programs - 84% responded positively to this type of program

DISCUSSION

Comparisons to Findings

A relationship between the study results and findings of others is well defined. The implementation of a program that emphasizes public education by fire stations interacting with the surrounding neighborhoods can be very effective, with a long term financial savings to the community. The reduction of deaths, injuries, and property loss are mitigated through firefighters educating the public to potential dangers. It is important to emphasize that the savings are realized not by suppression efforts, but through the integration of all safety efforts into the daily operation of the fire department (NFPA, 1974).

A primary goal of any fire organization should be to prioritize a commitment to meet the needs of the customer (Brunacini, 1988). This goal comes to fruition by implementing a plan to increase interaction between firefighters and neighborhood customers. The local fire station has the opportunity to expand their sense of family to the community as a whole (Compton, 1996). This will take the concept of public relations in the Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department to a level never achieved in its history.

Interpretations and Evaluation of results

The interpretations of the study results exemplify that interaction between the local fire station and the neighborhood is of primary importance. It is equally clear in the literature review and interview

results that various approaches to this concept are all over the spectrum. There appears to be a lack of focus in organizing programs that maximizes the resources of the firefighters.

A means of achieving the goal set forth for Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue is to enhance the organization of the fire station interaction with the neighborhood. The typical limited implementation of a home inspection program, CPR classes and smoke detector programs within many fire service organizations, limits the potential vision of this vital concept. Exponentially expanding this interaction in the community with additional services provides a program that will more fully intertwine each partner into a long term relationship. The Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department must rise to the challenge and take these programs into an arena never before achieved in the community.

Implications to the Organization

In order to implement the many programs that have been recommended, it will be necessary for station firefighters to play an active role in providing these new services to their respective communities. Station Officers must insure that their fire stations are open and presentable during scheduled times for tours, blood pressure checks, and all community related events.

Station Officers and Battalion Chiefs must be aware of what is occurring in their respective response areas, they will be required to seek out opportunities for public appearances. Essentially all members of the fire department must begin marketing their organizations similar to the private sector.

In order to make appearances, such as public safety talks or puppet shows, some initial training and preparations should be made. Personnel who are requested to complete public presentations must receive training in effective public speaking. A large scale and effective public relations program is time intensive and will require additional funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the literature review conducted in this project, articles were discovered that provided insight and understanding into the need for interaction with the neighborhood by each local fire station. The Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department has determined what programs or activities the surrounding neighborhoods desire and will provide these services at the local fire station or go out into the neighborhoods. The Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Department recognizes that residents in the community would support further interaction by the fire station personnel within their neighborhoods. The implementation of several programs identified in the literature review and the interviews with community residents should be undertaken after fire department personnel receive training specifically related to each program offered, including classes in public speaking.

Another recommendation would be to contact local civic organizations, homeowners' associations, churches, and other neighborhood clubs, and then document each establishment within a given station response area. Leadership and direction from fire department Station Officers is imperative in this area for this philosophy to take root. Specific recommendations related to various programs drawn from the research and literature reviews are as follows: An aggressive Home Inspection Program (HIP) will be instituted. Whereby, fire crews will respond to the residential occupancies. Based upon demographic information from the Palm Beach County census, high-risk areas will be targeted first, these would include mobile homes and single-family residences. Owners may request an on-site inspection through the Bureau of Safety Services - Fire Prevention Bureau or by

referral from various community agencies.

Every weekend, inspections will be conducted in the neighborhoods as engine companies will “drive-through” the specific housing developments. If residents are not at home, a self-inspection checklist in the door hanger format, will be left at the residence. The checklist will include a contact name and number for the homeowner to call and schedule an inspection at the homeowner’s convenience, at no charge. When the resident is home, the crews perform the inspection and include exit drill planning while on-site. The time for the inspection would vary, but one-half hour would be adequate. The HIP includes a smoke detector check. Any resident without a detector will have one installed by the on scene crew. In addition, batteries of existing detectors will be replaced as needed, and new detectors installed where indicated. Smoke detectors and batteries are replaced at no charge. In addition, through joint efforts with area hospitals, every new baby will go home with a new working smoke detector.

Station crews will increase their involvement with the area schools, civic groups and community associations. Public speaking engagements and requests are anticipated to increase. A simple program will be developed to distribute fire safety messages throughout the area churches regardless of the denomination. Fire crews, in conjunction with the Palm Beach County Safety Council, will administer a bicycle safety rodeo that can be completed at area schools or the local fire station. Bicycle helmets and safety tips are to be distributed upon completion of the rodeo.

Through the use of print, video and radio media, fire safety and injury prevention messages will be actively promoted. Community Fire Station Open Houses will be held throughout the year at varying locations and times in an effort to introduce the residents to the fire department personnel and their job

descriptions.

Local media will be invited to compete in several station evolutions. A contest will be held to determine which media station would win. Wearing turnout gear without the air packs, reporters and photographers, can climb ladders, use extinguishers, and squirt water to determine the outcome. The neighborhood citizens will be invited to the event to watch, learn and meet their local station personnel. The local community newspapers will run a monthly fire safety tip's column. The Palm Beach County government Channel 20 will produce two monthly half hour programs spotlighting specific fire and medical issues.

The Palm Beach County "Palm-Tran" bus service will paint a county bus like a fire truck, and uses both sideboards for seasonal fire safety messages. In addition all city busses will carry safety messages in the interior signboards. PSA's will be produced and air on local radio stations, and be published in the Palm Beach County daily Newspapers. Five "30" and "60" second video PSA's will air on all four networks. Corporate and large employers will also include fire safety and injury prevention messages in their respective newsletters.

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